Dispelling myths about vaccination through peer-to-peer interactions in geographical and online communities

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Introduction

Within Australia there a number of professional organisations such as the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, the Australian Academy of Sciences and the Immunise Australia Program providing high quality, evidence based information for the general public about vaccination. However in spite of this there are still a number of pockets of low (childhood) vaccination, including the Northern Rivers region in NSW. The exact reasons for this and other pockets of vaccination hesitant or refusing parents are complex.

The Northern Rivers region includes Byron Bay, Ballina, Mullumbimby, the Richmond Valley, Tweed Valley and Lismore. This area has some of the lowest vaccination rates in Australia.

In the town of Mullumbimby fewer than 45% of 1 year olds, 55% of 2 year olds and 47% of 5 year olds are fully immunised.

In the Northern Rivers region there is anecdotal evidence that there is a higher than average number of people using complementary and alternative practitioners (chiropractors, naturopaths, homeopaths, Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners, etc) as their primary healthcare provider rather than medically trained doctors (GPs). There is no evidence that these alternative health practitioners have training in vaccination, and indeed several of these modalities do not acknowledge the germ theory of disease.

This trend away from GPs may contribute to the low vaccination rates as there is research that suggests that health practitioners play a critical role in providing parents with information that is influential in their immunisation decisions (Leask et al., BMC Pediatrics 2012, 12:154). Without a “family doctor” with whom a trusting relationship has built up over time many people may not have access to evidence based information about vaccination from someone they have a personal relationship with.

The Northern Rivers Vaccination Supporters (NRVS) group has extended to include a public Facebook page, website and forum to empower members to talk confidently, toothers, regarding vaccination.

NRVS has made contact with other groups in the area interested in vaccination. NRVS has been asked to give a presentation to the Byron Shire Rotary Club about vaccination in the Northern Rivers. Rotary’s End Polio Now campaign is a worldwide project focussed on vaccination.

Initiation of a program to have NRVS featured in local GP surgery ‘professional directories’ as an information source for vaccine hesitant parents.

Involved as a stakeholder with the local Immunisation Task Force consisting of public health and other interested parties and being viewed as a voice for the community.

Self-funded printing and distribution of posters to 70 local GP surgeries and paediatric facilities in the Northern Rivers.

Activities and Results of the NRVS

Successfully lobbying of local council and local state politicians to support subsidised vaccinations for pregnant women

Lobbying the media with regards to their methods of news reporting around vaccination, in particular the issue of false balance NRVS have featured in local, state, and professional media (radio and newspapers) over the last year.

Future Directions

All work is done on a voluntary basis, with contributors having full time commitments in other areas of their lives.

Discussion

Community groups such the Northern Rivers Vaccination Supporters (NRVS) group, and Stop the Australian (Anti) Vaccination Network (SAVN), demonstrate a unique approach to disseminating health information, with a particular focus on vaccination. Through evidence-based peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, organisations like NRVS may be able to combat anti-vaccination myths as part of a conversation where trust and personal relationships are developed over time.

Difficulties

- Personal attacks from well-funded professional anti-vaccination group (AVSN).
- Difficulties in funding all the proposed initiatives because wider community suspicion of pharmaceutical, and even government, funded organisations To date all initiatives have been self funded by NRVS members.
- Communication with alternative health practitioners is difficult due to the prevalence of anti-vaccination sentiments.
- All work is done on a voluntary basis, with contributors having full time commitments in other areas of their lives.

Northern Rivers Vaccination Supporters (NRVS)

The Northern Rivers Vaccination Supporters (NRVS) began in May 2013 as an informal private online support network and included parents, medical professionals, and other local community members. Over the past 12 months the NRVS group has extended to include a public Facebook page, website and twitter account as a method of communicating information about vaccination, with a focus on the local community. NRVS has an online reach of more than 50,000 people.

The private group continues to provide a supportive safe environment for members including parents who have lost a child to vaccine preventable disease and those who have been personally targeted by anti-vaccine activists, including members of the Australian Vaccination (Skeptics) Network.

We have made it a safe, positive and proactive environment for people to speak out in support of vaccination in the Northern Rivers. The group has grown to over 200 parents, grandparents, medical professionals and concerned citizens. Ideas are discussed as well as the sharing of information to empower members to talk confidently, to others, regarding vaccination.

NRVS: Personal Stories

It is all about starting a conversation...

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Discussion

- Regular sessions with ‘mother and baby’ groups to present information and answer questions in a casual and relaxed forum.
- Start a dialogue with local alternative health practitioners about supporting vaccination. Some complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) representative bodies already have a clear pro-vaccine stance, e.g. the Chiropractic and Osteopathic College of Australasia (COCA), which demonstrates that CAM and vaccination are not mutually exclusive.
- Remove the controversy of vaccination as a topic of discussion. Encourage and support people who do and want to vaccinate to speak out positively and be able to communicate with others.
- Continue to build local visibility and reputation within the community as an friendly, accessible and non-judgemental source of information for vaccine hesitant parents.